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Trump team ‘survey’ sent to overseas researchers prompts foreign interference fears

The document asks US-funded scientists in Australia, the UK and the EU to declare links to China or projects on diversity, equity and inclusion.

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The Wageningen University & Research in the Netherlands has posted online a copy of the survey some of its researchers received. Credit: Shutterstock

A growing number of researchers in Australia, Europe, the United Kingdom and

Canada who receive US funding have been asked to declare their institution's links to China and whether their projects comply with US government ideology. Associations representing universities in these regions say this threatens academic freedom and undermines scientific advancement.

Several universities or university associations have confirmed to *Nature* that some of their staff or members were sent a detailed survey asking whether their US-funded projects relate to diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), climate and environmental justice or study what the survey calls 'gender ideology'. In the United States, President Donald Trump's administration has cut funding for research related to these topics. Other questions ask specifically about the institution's funding ties and collaborations with entities that could be against US interests.

The survey "is at the extreme end of foreign influence in a way that we have never seen from any of our research partners", says Vicki Thomson, chief executive of the Group of Eight (Go8) consortium of Australia's leading research universities, some of which have received the survey. It could "tip over to foreign interference if it is contrary to our values and national interests", she says.

Many universities in Europe have advised their researchers not to respond to the survey, but some in Australia have responded.

The questions

The 36-point survey also asks researchers whether their institutions work with communist, socialist or any parties that espouse anti-American beliefs, according to copies of the questionnaire posted online by UK newspaper *The Guardian* and *Resource*, a magazine published by Wageningen University & Research in the Netherlands.

Responses to questions are scored out of a total of 180 points. Projects get higher

points if they don't contribute to DEI, climate and 'gender ideology', or their organisation doesn't work with communist, socialist or parties that espouse anti-American beliefs. Projects that contribute to preventing illegal immigration to the United States; to combating prosecution of Christians; and to supporting efforts to secure rare-earth minerals also score highly. By contrast, institutions that receive funding from China, Russia, Cuba or Iran score lower.

Thomson says that, although funding agencies often ask about universities' policies around modern slavery, gender-equality plans and other good research practices, many questions in the survey are "beyond the traditional scope of grant compliance". Researchers were given 48 hours to respond to the questionnaires, she says.

Chad Gaffield, chief executive of the U15-Group of Canadian Research Universities in Ottawa, says that while the questionnaire asks some familiar and appropriate questions about accountability, transparency and security, other points "politicize the research enterprise". The questions threaten the ability of US-led research projects to address crucial questions and thereby undermine the advancement of knowledge, says Gaffield.

In the Netherlands, where researchers in at least one university were sent the survey, Caspar Van den Berg, president of Universities of the Netherlands, which represents 14 universities in the country, said the survey was an example of the deteriorating climate for the freedom of scientific practice in the United States, which affects Dutch universities and Dutch researchers. It "underlines the importance of all of us standing up for free science", Van den Berg said in the daily Dutch newspaper *NRC*.

University response

The surveys have been forwarded to foreign researchers either from their university research partners in the United States or sent directly to researchers abroad from US government departments. Copies of the survey that have been shared online state

that the document has been sent on the instruction of the US Office of Management and Budget, a large office in the executive branch of government, which oversees the budget.

Ruben Puylaert, spokesperson for Wageningen University & Research, confirmed in an e-mail to *Nature* that one of its researchers had received the questionnaire from the US Geological Survey. Thomson says Australian researchers have also received the survey from the US Department of Agriculture and the US Department of State. And the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH) in Zürich told *Nature* that it had also received the questionnaire. Markus Gross, spokesperson for the institute, said they are currently consulting with other Swiss universities on how to respond.

The US Geological Survey and the US Office of Management and Budget could not be reached for comment on the survey and criticisms of it before this article was published.

Several European universities told *Nature* they are advising researchers not to respond. "As far as we are informed, none of the LERU members which received the questionnaire answered it," says Yasmine Nowicki, communications officer for the League of European Research Universities (LERU), an association representing 24 universities across Europe.

But Australian universities are taking a different approach, says Thomson. The advice from the Australian government, she says, was "where best we can, it is better for researchers to respond to the questions rather than refuse to respond".

The difference in approach between Australia and Europe could be due to Australia's exposure to US funding, says Thomson. The United States is the largest international research funding partner for the Go8 universities.

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